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SUBJECT: ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN BABIL: CREDITABLE IMPROVEMENTS OVER 2005

11. (U) SUMMARY. The Babil provincial election campaign has been lively and robust, engaging previously alienated voters (Sunnis and Saddrists) and producing predictions of a high turnout. The campaign reflects creditable progress over the last election in 2005, and the Independent High Electoral Commission's (IHEC) performance in the province has been generally effective, fair and impartial. None of the campaign violations that have occurred - and all but two of the 77 political entities have been served warnings - are serious enough to put in question the credibility of the January 31 vote, although the greatest risk of fraud will occur in the ballot counting on election night, in the view of IHEC and political party leaders. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) Babil's Provincial Council (PC) election campaign has been robust with more candidates competing than in any province outside of Baghdad. ISCI and Da'wa have used their influence with the media and larger war chests to get out their message, but nearly all political entities and candidates have engaged in active campaigning. The provincial capital and many towns are plastered with campaign posters from the 77 political entities fielding candidates. PM Nuri Al-Maliki made a campaign stop in Al-Hillah to address a rally at a football stadium, signaling Da'wa's hope of building on the PM's personal popularity with the voters. Other national figures campaigned in Babil, including Da'wa breakaway leader Ibrahim Al-Ja'afari who visited Hillah to assist ISCI's campaign by meeting with voters; COR member and Badr chief Al-Ameri held a campaign meeting in Hillah's Badr HQ; and ISCI's dauphin, Ammar Al-Hakim, visited Hillah and held a rally at the same stadium as PM Al-Maliki.

Strong Turnout Expected

13. (U) Despite complexity of the ballot, most voters claim to be informed about the voting process, and voter turnout is likely to exceed the levels (65%) of the 2005 election. Earlier voter skepticism appeared to slacken during the vibrant election campaign of the last several weeks. The Sunnis in the north are expected to fully participate in the election, although no one slate appears to own the Sunni vote. Even the Saddrists, who only months ago questioned the political process are actively engaged in campaigning. In addition to the two "officially endorsed" slates, Saddrist voters have at least three others from which to choose.

Prospects for Change

14. (SBU) Governor Salim Saleh Al-Muslimawi does not have a university degree, which in theory makes him ineligible to be reelected by a new PC. With one-third of the PC not running for reelection, the turnover could be considerable. As it appears that its hold on power may weaken or be broken, ISCI has increasingly relied on a message that it is the choice of the Najaf Shia leadership (Marja'iyah). Hadi Al-Ameri (ISCI/Badr) told Al-Hillah voters that his slate, Shaheed Al-Mihrab, is a part of the chosen people of Marja'iyah because of ISCI's sacrifices in resisting Saddam's regime.

Campaign Cheating: Widespread But Banal

¶5. (U) The Governor has even implied to his own hometown constituents that they would be damned if they did not vote for ISCI. Both ISCI and Da'wa, as well as former Governor Iskander Witwit, stand accused of bribing voters by dispensing phone cards, clothing, blankets, Qurans and meals in exchange for pledges to vote for their slate. Governor Salim arranged a mass wedding as a campaign event and included ISCI supporters who had already been married to boost the numbers. As part of the ceremony he also distributed wedding furniture to the "newlyweds" by using money he had "collected" from Al-Hillah merchants.

¶6. (U) Posters have been placed everywhere including government buildings, which has been the source of many campaign violations and complaints. However, most violations, as well as the use of public office/funds for campaign purposes, have been of the mundane type. In the view of many PRT contacts, the greatest risk of fraud will be during the counting and certification of the vote, especially in rural areas.

#### IHEC's Performance

¶7. (SBU) All but two of Babil's 77 political entities have been warned by IHEC over illegalities, but none has been fined as of January 26. The IHEC office in Babil has been fair and competent, although this view is not fully shared by some of the smaller political entities, who assume IHEC must be in the pocket of the parties in power. Campaign violence has been limited although highly publicized, as when Da'wa's number two candidate was assassinated in Jaballa on January 16.

HEATH